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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the position that the oral history approach has great value for educational research, not as a replacement of other procedures, but to augment other data collection approaches. In arriving at this position, various definitions of and theories about oral histories are reviewed, controversy over the validity of the limitations of oral history is discussed, and the techniques of oral history as well as the limitations on these techniques are described. In addition, personal experiences with oral histories and the potential contribution of oral histories to educational research are summarized. (EB)

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ORAL HISTORY AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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In reviewing the program planned by AERA, and looking at the workshops and papers that will be presented this week, you will notice that hardly any of the papers are reporting out on data on educational systems, that have been gathered using the oral history approach. Traditionally, educational researchers have based their research on strictly quantifiable data, usually based on the use of standardized tests, on interview schedules, and surveys that have been designed by the researcher. All have been based on the unwritten assumption that to be valid, a research project must be as close to being an experimental design as possible. Most of us share this feeling because of our training at the doctoral level. This is in spite of the fact that we are aware, that in doing educational research, it is very seldom that the real world will meet the criteria of an experimental research design. However, I feel that the growing increase in interest in research methodology that would deviate from the standard approach, is based on the fact that often when very cleanly designed results are obtained, our hypotheses are tested, and the results stated, we sometimes have the feeling that the data are not giving us a full picture, of what was going on in the classroom. Yet, in reality, the findings the educational researcher presents are often of absolutely no use to the educational practitioner. There is difficulty in bridging the gap between the real world of the classroom and the results that the well-trained, well-meaning evaluators could produce. One of the ways being proposed in bridging the gap between the evaluator and researcher, the practitioner, the administrator and the policymaker, is to try to get a fuller, more detailed, more human view of what is going on in the educational process, through ecological approaches.

I personally have shared this frustration in looking at some of my

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data. I will have a very nice report, but I know that it is not what I really saw when I went informally into the classroom. We are now exploring methods in collecting data that have been used by anthropologists and by historians. We are looking for ways that would give us another approach of obtaining data that would give us the information that we need, to make the educational plans and policies we are requested to do.

Some of the approaches being proposed and explored are those of what is generally called ecological research. This would involve participant observation, the non-participant observer, the keeping of journals, the keeping of diaries, and interviewing people who were involved in the school system, at the point of history in which you are interested. All of these have been approaches that have been used previously by people who are not educators, who do not have the background on the schools, and therefore may have difficulty in drawing out the educational practice implications from the data. Unfortunately, most of us did not get training in oral history and related approaches, when we were in school because of the status and mystique that was given to computer analysis. As more people become involved in these approaches, we may eventually get a blending of both methods. The difficulty, at this point in our knowledge, is that most of us have skills in either one or the other and very few people are able to cross the bridge. One of the things that we would like to get out of the workshop today is to look for researchable topics within the field of education, that would be amenable to these differential approaches in obtaining data.

DEFINITIONS OF ORAL HISTORIES

Baum (1975) defined oral history as a method of collecting historical information. Baum does not consider oral history a subject field in and of itself, but as a procedure, a methodology of collecting data that can have

many applications. It is a procedure of obtaining data from people, who lived during a particular event, who were directly or indirectly involved, or who were able to hear the direct participants of an event tell about their experiences. Baum says that an oral history is not a random conversation that was tape recorded. Instead it is a very systematic, planned, structured, or semi-structured, directed exposition of a particular topic.

Baum, interviewed by Cochran, was asked if the Nixon tapes were oral histories. She responded by saying the tapes could be considered oral history. They were not planned, the speakers had no knowledge that they were being recorded, and there was no systematic way of ordering them. Mere use of the tape recorder and two people talking in an interview, are not enough to be considered oral history.

Mantell (1970) defines oral history as a body of oral traditional narratives, that are told by people about themselves. The narratives give an accurate view of how people view themselves at a given point in time Henige (1974) defined the oral tradition, and the methodology of recording the oral tradition, as the body of orally transmitted material, which addresses itself to recounting the past of an individual. Henige felt that in looking at the methodology of oral history, one must be careful in distinguishing between traditions and testimonies, between official and unofficial traditions, and between individual and consensual accounts.

One of the beauties of doing oral histories is that we are able to go to the primary source to gather the data. One of the goals in research is to try to minimize the intervening persons, between the experience and our reporting of it. Data may be obtained from primary or secondary resources. Fox (1969) has broken the primary sources into the animate and the inanimate. The animate source occurs when a person reports an experience that actually

happened to him. An example would be the reporting by the child who was abused by a teacher. The inanimate source, of primary information, would be the physical artifacts, mechanically reproduced records, films, and videotapes of events that have happened. In conducting the contemporary oral history, we want to get as close as possible to the original person who had an experience. If we are looking at the problems that Black school superintendents face, one would hope that the researcher would not rely only on events that are presented in The Washington Post and The New York Times, however valid they may be, but that one would put his emphasis on actually interviewing the Black superintendents in Washington, Baltimore, and other areas, to get the firsthand view on how they felt as they went through this experience.

In oral history, the secondary source of data refers to any data that is two steps removed from the event. The secondhand sources can be close or distant to the event. An example of a close secondary source would be a newspaper story reporting the fact that a school superintendent had been fired. A distant secondary source would be the dissertation that somebody wrote, based upon the newspaper articles about the difficulties of these superintendents.

CONTROVERSY ON THE VALIDITY OF LIMITATIONS OF ORAL HISTORY

I think few of us would question whether or not a more full view of the classroom is available through the oral history approach. However, the important question would refer to the validity of the data collected. What good is an interesting human interest story if it is not valid or one has no way of checking the accuracy?

In simply stating that one must determine the correctness of oral history data, an assumption is implied that oral history can, in fact, be validated. There is a controversy that goes back many years between historians, over whether or not it is possible to consider any data correct that is obtained from an oral source. The same resistance is not shown in validating the accuracy of written data, even though the written data can be just as biased and as selective in the recording of events.

Mantell (1970) has presented the four views of oral tradition controversy. The first view is a very hostile view. This is the one that is held by scholars who are accustomed to only studying written data or statistical reports. This view holds that oral history should not be considered as documentation, but only as additional color, that can be added to data that have been collected by other means. The second view is that oral traditions can be valid, but only as long as they are substantiated by written resources. The third view would hold that the folklore obtained through oral history is actually a mirror of history. The fourth position states that the fables and stories of any people are grounded in historical fact. Those holding this fourth view would probably place more validity in data obtained through this method than by other procedures.

Researchers who agree with the first two views tend to be historians who were writing in the early part of the century, although there is strong evidence that this view persists today. (The case against oral histories is presented by historians Hockette (1938), Johnson (1926), and anthropologist Lowie (1915)). They state that oral history offers nothing of positive value. In their writings, there is a certain amount of racism evident toward the non-dominant groups. We must remember that the writers

were from an earlier time, but unfortunately their statements are frequently quoted in contemporary works. Lowie, in referring to Native Americans, found the Indian tradition to be "historically worthless" because he felt the events probably did not occur, and if they did, they were of "no historical significance". His criteria tend to state that events that happened to a minority group were non-significant.

The second view towards oral history sees folk history as history that has been embellished. Because history does tend to get reshaped, it is necessary to have a person who is skilled in folklore, review the tapes with the contemporary social scientist, if one of the data sets is a historical view of events leading up to a particular educational change. This would be especially necessary in events and attitudes that Blacks have held during certain points of time in American history.

The third view of the controversy, on the validity of the oral history methodology, would see folklore as actual history. It is an accurate reflection of what actually went on or what is actually going on. The oral history would provide an understanding of educational traditions that are now being developed, that are now reflected, or will be reflected in the future, in written material.

The fourth view of the controversy, would see folk and oral history as historical fact in and of itself. This has been substantiated over and over again. A good example would be the Native Americans in Utah. Their folktales have been found to be accurate assessments, of the archaeological changes that occurred over the last 800 years (Mantell, 1970). Oral histories from this view would be seen as simply another form of recordkeeping, as valid as written documents.

Fox (1969) gives some guidelines on evaluating the source of historical data. One needs to first evaluate the reputation of the source. The second thing is to evaluate the information itself. In looking at the information, one checks for internal and external consistency.

There are three primary sources from which one may get data. If any one of these sources is missing, the data you have is probably not a fact, but a probability (Fox, 1969). One must have these three things: (1) the same view of information given by two independent, unrelated sources; (2) you may have several sources, but one must be an independent primary source, directly involved in the incident; and (3) no other data from a reputable source, has been collected that would present a contrary view.

In reviewing the different theories which are held about the efficacy of using oral history, one must be cautious in making any blanket statement on validity. Any evaluation should be based upon the awareness that historically the traditions are recorded within a framework of reference, that is constructed by the society. For example, oral histories that are obtained from the educators and lawyers who worked on the side of the segregationists in 1958, would be totally different from those that were obtained from the lawyers and civil rights workers, who worked with the Legal Defense Fund. Each side would consider itself as being valid. In looking back at the forces that went into the school desegregation decision, we would see that the two points of view should be reflected, and that neither one would be totally accurate.

Mantell (1970) summed up this controversy well, as he presented his data on the Coe colony. He said that by being able to establish

supporting evidence from the written data, and from his interviews with Blacks and whites, young and old, he was able to make certain assumptions about the oral history process. His first is that in spite of all the limitations, informants tend to be truthful. They usually do not consciously falsify their reports. The people being interviewed may improvise details of an event, in order to make it compatible to their frame of reference.

The third assumption on oral history, is that dates are fixed within our memory on the basis of what is happening at the same time. Our memories tend to go from one event to the next, blotting out the everyday events that occur.

The fourth point to remember is to be aware that as we individually organize the memory around events, the school community also tends to organize its memory around significant events. Parents may be aware of the bond issue that is being advertised now and may relate this recent event, but totally fail to mention the bond issue that was voted down last year. We tend to selectively focus on the largest recent event. If you ask school administrators to talk about the desegregation effort in 1975-76, they would tend to focus on the problem cities of Boston and Louisville, totally forgetting to relate about those where children, parents, and school administrators were able to make the change without difficulty.

There are many problems connected with oral history. There are few people within the school systems, and college departments, who are skilled in doing oral histories. However, it is important that more people start, because today's oral tradition will remain unwritten unless it is written

down by the people who are closely related. When a person is asked a question, he is responding on many different levels. The difference between the skilled and non-skilled oral historian, is that the skilled historian is aware of the many different levels, and with training is able to differentiate between the different levels. Only then can one trust validity of the data that have been collected.

TECHNIQUES OF ORAL HISTORY

The techniques of oral history have been well developed. It is impossible to go into details, but there are highlights we all need to know. In doing oral history one must continue to be aware that the issue of the protection of human subjects and confidentiality are just as valid, as when the standardized tests and individual personality assessments are made. We must stress that whenever tapes are made formal written permission must be obtained. Legally one cannot present or publish material without the written permission. If permission is not obtained at that point in time, it may be difficult, or impossible in case of death, to use this information.

One limitation that must be kept in mind, is that an oral history program is very expensive. A tape recorder and tapes initially may not be that expensive. The most expensive cost, one that is often overlooked, is in the transcription of the tapes by a transcribing secretary or stenographer, and the great amount of time that must be taken to do coding. A review of the tapes of an interview, that took two hours, could require ten or twelve hours of transcribing, reviewing, and reliability coding. One must be careful to avoid the pitfall of collecting the data and then not being able to analyze it because of insufficient funds and time.

One must be careful, because it appears to be so simple. The same care and the same steps of producing a research report must be taken. It is necessary to have a very precise definition of the problem and to be able to articulate a rationale. One of the problems of oral history is that a review of literature is often more difficult. The hypothesis generating or the hypothesis testing approach may be used. One would need to articulate, as precisely as in any other methodology approach, the specific hypothesis that one is testing. The major difference in this design is that the data are collected in a different manner. The analysis of data will be necessarily more complicated and will not as easily be quantified into a neat packet.

Another of the major problems in oral history, is that we have a large body of raw data. If one is not well organized, one will have data that may not be that difficult to collect, but that will be impossible to analyze and report out. Many of us are afraid that this is what is going to happen with much of the Bicentennial data. There are many funded projects (the Ethnic Heritage Studies, under Title 9) all over the country, on big and small scale, where oral histories are being developed and where tapes are being collected. As Cochran said (1976), we have no idea of what we will get out of those tapes, because so many people are using so many different procedures. Some of it will be extremely valuable for the future, some will probably be garbage. Many of them will be able to go beyond the recording of history in the past and may have direct application for educational experiences.

EXPERIENCE WITH ORAL HISTORY

I have had personal experience with oral history in (1) my Human

Growth and Behavior class where I required them to do their own family histories; (2) in a Seminar on the Black Family and Child that I team-taught (with Andrew Billingsley, Billie Petite Manns, and Clarice Walker), in which the same requirement was made; (3) and in research that I am continuing with my own family.

Now what are the contributions of oral histories to educational research? I do think the oral history method would be of benefit to those of us in the educational community. The first and main benefit is that it provides a richness of data. It also provides insight often impossible with only standardized instruments, and gives us a check on the validity of the test data obtained. In spite of the many limitations this approach could be used in the educational setting. But we are not going to be able to have studies reported until some of the attitudes currently held toward oral history are changed in the social science community.

Oral history is not seen by educational researchers as valid research at this point. Higher status is still given to research that is quantifiable and computer analyzed. The case history approach is seen as one that is used when the student really does not have the ability to do anything else. I find myself falling into the same bias: it was okay for my students to do an oral history within my Human Behavior course, but in my research I insist on an empirically-based study. I feel that they have learned how to do case studies during the years of graduate school. Therefore, I have not allowed my students to do a case study as a thesis. I feel that if one does not insist that the student have a computer-based experience in the graduate research process, he may never have the chance. Later on when he is re-

quired to start writing evaluation proposals, training grant proposals, and to analyze data on whatever level, he will not have had the opportunity to have learned these skills. However, we need to realize that oral history is more than a case study. It must be as rigorous as any other research approach. In my own research, I anticipate that I will begin to use more of the oral history approach, but only as an adjunct to our other data.

My husband and I are now involved in parallel studies in which we are looking into the interactions between father and child, and mother and child, on a pre-school level. We are examining how the parental attitudes toward child-rearing practices, and opportunities for educational and occupational mobility, are related to how the child views himself: his own self-esteem, his achievement motivation, and his racial self-identity. If there is time, we would like to supplement this developmental research design with two or three hours of oral histories, taken from the families we have selected to be the most representative of the different parent styles, and educational mobility patterns.

Oral history could be useful in many ways. One could study, for example, the impact of forced desegregation in the North on achievement motivation of the children. Another could be the busing experience from the child's point of view. What were the children actually thinking about, what were their reactions, how did they perceive the situation? We are usually presented with the viewpoint of the adult observer, who may or may not be objective. Another possibility could be the experiences of the Black administrators in the southern all-Black schools, who were displaced when the school systems were merged during the last five to ten years.

In my bibliography I have included several additional resources you should consult if you are interested in pursuing this in more detail. I also have found several articles that relate to the technical aspect of using the tape recorder and cassettes. Baum has some specific guidelines for doing oral histories, that are available from ERIC.

In closing, I want to repeat that I see the oral history approach as having great value for educational research, not as a replacement of the other procedures, but to augment other data collection approaches.

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